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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 PESHAWAR 000477

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 9/29/2018

TAGS: [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN KURRAM TO FACE PAKISTAN MILITARY OPERATION?

REF: A) PESHAWAR 409 B) PESHAWAR 396 C) PESHAWAR 384 D) PESHAWAR 36 E) 07 PESHAWAR 739 F) 07 PESHAWAR 248

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REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Violence in Kurram Agency has claimed over 700 lives since early August when the latest wave of sectarian fighting escalated. Over 1300 have been killed in the last 17 months of sporadic clashes. The Sunni have historically had a slight upper hand in fighting, first in the April 2007 violence (Ref. F) and again in November (Refs. D, E). Within the past month, however, the Shi'a have launched a series of lethal attacks and have won new ground. Rumors consistently attribute the Shi'a momentum to Afghan and Iranian support. Local taliban from North Waziristan, who support the Sunni tribes, carved out a transit corridor in lower Kurram in late 2007, linking North Waziristan to Khost Province in Afghanistan. But on August 31, the Shi'a captured several Sunni and local taliban strongholds in the corridor. A ceasefire struck on September 9 has slowed but not stopped the violence, and over 45 have been killed since September 18. A second ceasefire was concluded on September 27 whose effect has yet to be seen. The patchwork of Sunni, Shi'a and local taliban control of roads has led to the shutdown of most of the main arteries linking the agency to Hangu District and Afghanistan, even though on August 20 the Frontier Corps deployed four wings (approximately 2,400 men) to intervene along the road. The military authorized an operation of one brigade to clear the corridor that the local taliban control on September 2. But with ongoing operations in Bajaur, Swat and Darra Adam Khel it is unlikely that military intervention will be launched in the immediate future.

Baghzai: A Shi'a Victory

[1](#)2. (C) Ghulam Qadir, the Secretary for Law and Order at the FATA Secretariat, confirms that the recent fighting in Kurram has resulted in heavy casualties for the local taliban from North Waziristan. Over 700 on both sides have been killed in six weeks of fighting, nearly 100 of whom were killed on August 31 in battles for the Baghzai area and in three alleged suicide attacks staged by the Sunni Bangash tribe against the Shi'a Turi tribe. Much of the fighting has taken place in the area between Alizai and Sadda in Sunni-dominated Lower Kurram and around the Peiwar border crossing, 25 km northwest of Parachinar in Shi'a dominated upper Kurram. The Turi tribemen lead the six Shi'a tribes and the Bangash tribesmen lead the six Sunni tribes. On August 31, the Shi'a captured several villages in the Baghzai area, a stronghold of the Sunni Bangash tribe and their taliban supporters. A post contact whose staff visited Baghzai soon thereafter said that the villages were burnt down and the inhabitants had fled.

[1](#)3. (C) Sited across the river from Alizai in lower Kurram, Baghzai also has strategic significance for the local taliban

from North Waziristan. It lies in the heart of the transit corridor that these local taliban carved out in lower Kurram in late 2007 to link North Waziristan to Khost Province in Afghanistan. A post contact estimates that the taliban from North Waziristan receive bribes of between \$150,000 and \$250,000 per month to allow safe passage along the dust "kacha" tracks in the corridor. (Note: The corridor consists of all of lower Kurram west of the river to Afghanistan, as far north as Arawali, which is approximately seven kilometers south of Sadda. End note.)

The Fight to Control the Roads

14. (C) Most roads that supply Kurram are closed. Smuggling routes have become the primary ways of supplying the agency and sustaining the local economy. On August 20 the Kurram Militia, the Frontier Corps for the agency, deployed four wings -- approximately 2,400 men -- to intervene along the Thall-Sadda road, much of which is controlled by the Sunni. Qadir said that the Kurram Militia has been successful at checking local

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vehicles. They are afraid to confront vehicles of the local taliban, however, because they are outgunned. The locals interpret this as government support for the local taliban, creating a credibility problem for the political administration. (Note: The levies in Kurram are predominantly Shi'a and mostly police Parachinar. The Kurram Militia once consisted of mostly Shi'a members but recent heavy Sunni recruitment outside of Kurram has made it Sunni dominated. End note.)

15. (C) Previous government convoys, supply trucks and private vehicles attempting to use the road to Parachinar through Hangu District and Lower Kurram have been blocked and seized. Drivers, particularly those who are Shi'a, have been killed and mutilated. On June 19 the political agent ordered a government convoy of 24 trucks to use the road despite the blockage. When the convoy was ambushed, the political agent used pre-positioned military air support to drive away the militants. Even so, twelve drivers were killed and their bodies mutilated (Ref. C). Post contacts state that roads linking the agency to Afghanistan and Hangu District are still controlled by a patchwork of Sunni, Shi'a and local taliban groups. Essential to travel from Kurram to Peshawar is the Thall-Hangu road through Hangu District. This has again come under the control of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) despite the military operation in Hangu in July (Refs. A, B). In Lower Kurram, the Thall-Sadda road is primarily controlled by the Sunni and local taliban, with some pockets of Shi'a control. In Upper Kurram, the roads are predominantly held by Shi'a tribes, though there is ongoing fighting at the most heavily used border crossing with Afghanistan at Peiwar. As a result of the fighting in the border region, this road has not been a reliable supply route in recent months. Even when the Peiwar crossing is viable, convoys must pass through unstable areas in Khost Province in Afghanistan and Khyber Agency in Pakistan in order to reach Peshawar. (Note: The Sunni Maqbal tribe spans the Pakistan-Afghan border and the Afghan tribesmen sometimes take revenge on transiting vehicles for attacks on their kin on the Pakistani side of the border. End note.)

16. (C) Episodes of sectarianism have hit elsewhere in the province in the past six weeks. On September 18, press sources reported that the local taliban evicted 200 Shi'a families from Orakzai. The August 18 suicide bombing near a Dera Ismail Khan hospital killed 32 who had gathered to mourn the assassination of a Shi'a leader. A Shi'a leader was killed separately in Peshawar on August 16.

What the Shi'a and Sunni Want

17. (C) The Shi'a and Sunni of Kurram both want three things: the reopening of the roads, the right to return to their homes in areas dominated by the other sect, and monetary compensation for property damage in the past ten months. In July, Shi'a tribal elders agreed to the resettlement of Sunnis in Upper Kurram in principle but refused to give guarantees of their safety. The Sunnis did not return out of fear that the Shi'a majority in Upper Kurram would seek retribution against them for any action against the Shi'a in Sunni-controlled Lower Kurram. (Note: Central Kurram, known as Frontier Region Kurram until February 2004, is almost exclusively Sunni. Although tribes from this area are involved in the fighting in Upper and Lower Kurram, there have been no reports of fighting in their territory. End Note.)

Outside Support Exacerbates the Violence

18. (C) The local taliban from North Waziristan allegedly moved into Kurram to maintain a corridor to Afghanistan and to support the Sunni in the sectarian unrest. The Shi'a allegedly receive support from former Northern Alliance elements of the Afghan military as well as financial and advisory support from Iran. On 25 August, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Interior Affairs, Rehman Malik, publicly accused foreign elements of involvement

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in Kurram. Post contacts say that if the outside fighters were pushed out of Kurram, the local Sunni and Shi'a tribes could negotiate a credible truce. Although it is unclear how many outside fighters support the young militants in Kurram, post contacts estimate that the numbers on each side are in the hundreds.

Local Taliban from North Waziristan

19. (C) According to post contacts, Sunni tribes allowed the local taliban from North Waziristan to support them during the unrest in November 2007 (Refs. D, F). The local taliban wanted a corridor into Afghanistan due to the pressure on the Afghan side of the North Waziristan border. According to the Liaison Officer (LNO) from Combined Joint Taskforce (CJTF) 101, there are four navigable passes from the lower Kurram corridor into Afghanistan. Coalition forces have not had significant enemy contact on the Afghan side of that border, however, nor have they recorded more cross-border attacks from Kurram. The LNO from CJTF 101 reports that cross-border attacks from Lower Kurram number about one or two each week. (Note: Upper Kurram attacks are almost non-existent. End note.)

10. (C) The local taliban quickly extended their reach within Lower Kurram, according to post contacts. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) took responsibility for the suicide bombing at a PPP rally in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in February in Shi'a dominated Parachinar, which killed 40. Post contacts suggest that the local taliban motivation to engage Shi'a in Kurram has been spurred on by the anti-Shi'a group, Lashkar-i-Janghvi, which has links to TTP in North Waziristan. When the local taliban entered the agency, they demanded that the Sunnis blow up CD shops in Alizai and Sadda, the two main cities in lower Kurram. The damage from ongoing violence to economic livelihoods in the area and the ideological bent of the local taliban have soured the relationship between the Sunni and the Wazirs. But, according to a post contact, the local taliban from North Waziristan are now sufficiently entrenched in Kurram that the Sunni do not know how to sideline them. The local taliban in Kurram are mostly from the Utmanzai Wazir and Daur tribes. They are allegedly supplemented by small contingents of Chechens and Uzbeks and some local taliban from South Waziristan.

Afghan Support for the Shi'a

11. (C) Ghulam Qadir claims that some Afghan intelligence officers formerly of the Northern Alliance have brought in weapons, financing and advice to support the Shi'a against the taliban. Another post contact specifies that Hazara, Tajiks, and Uzbeks have been lending support for two months now. But post contacts are unsure whether the Afghan support has been officially sanctioned. They only point out that the Afghan government has tried to send convoys of supplies to Shi'a dominated Parachinar, the administrative hub of the agency located in upper Kurram.

12. (S) On August 17, the Sunni Bangash tribe claimed to capture seven uniformed Afghan National Army personnel. A post press contact who interviewed two of the captured men said that they spoke of Shi'a elders from the Turi tribe meeting earlier in the year with Afghan President Hamid Karzai to ask for support in their fight with the local taliban. Although the political agent publicly dismissed the presence of Afghan soldiers in Kurram, post contacts close to him say he was trying to prevent a blame game from ramping up. Post contacts attribute part of the success of the recent Shi'a offensive to this Afghan support.

The Iran Connection

13. (C) Senior Pakistan military officials stated that Iran has

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also stepped up its financial and advisory support to the Shi'a of Kurram, according to one civilian Pakistani security advisor. They speculate that this support may be channeled through the

Hazaras of Afghanistan, who also receive Iranian support. For years the Iranian Consulate in Peshawar has allegedly provided scholarships to Shi'a students from Kurram. Although some students have gone to the Iranian seminaries in Qom to become clerics, others have gone instead to Lebanon and, more recently, Iraq to be trained as fighters, according to a post contact. The two militias operating in Upper Kurram call themselves the "Mehdi Militia" and "Hezbollah." (Note: Although sectarian violence in Kurram began in 1939, the relationship between the Shi'a of Pakistan and Iran goes back to 1979. The era of heightened sectarianism after the Iranian revolution under the leadership of President Zia ul-Haq ushered in new ties between Iran and the Shi'a communities throughout Pakistan. End note.)

Jirga Brokers an Ineffective Ceasefire

14. (C) The ceasefire declared on September 9, designed to last until December 26, came on the heels of a Shi'a offensive in lower Kurram. The ceasefire has not held. Hangu District and Orakzai Agency jointly sent a peace jirga to Kurram on August 19 to broker peace. Eight Sunni members negotiated in Lower Kurram, and eight Shi'a members negotiated separately in Upper Kurram. Over the course of two weeks, the Shi'a agreed to support the government's efforts to end militancy in the agency, but the Sunni were reluctant to submit to a ceasefire. Several post contacts noted that tribal elders from the Kurram tribes have lost their influence to the young militants. On the Shi'a side, the elders have also lost ground to pro-Iranian clerics. Many are afraid to speak out for fear of being targeted.

Possible Military Intervention

15. (C) Despite the weakness of the tribal elders, post contacts believe that peace can be negotiated among the tribes once the outside elements are pushed out of the agency. On September 2, the military authorized an operation of one brigade to clear the corridor that the local taliban of North Waziristan control, according to a post contact who proposed the plan. With the corridor controlled, he expects negotiations between the tribes and Kurram Militia efforts will have vastly better prospects of success. He maintains that it will be insufficient to clear Kurram alone, however. Without extending the operation into Hangu District and clearing the Thall-Hangu road of TTP militants, the agency will still be blocked off from access to the settled areas of Pakistan.

Political Administration Enforces Sanctions

16. (C) Qadir reports that with approximately \$250,000 the political agent could buy off everyone in authority to halt violence in the agency. In early September, the political agent ordered sanctions against Shi'a and Sunni business interests, in a bid to coerce the tribal elders into cooperation. Section 21 of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) enables the political agent to confiscate property belonging to any member of a tribe if a fellow tribesman disrupts the peace. The political agent closed transport businesses, shops, and hotels owned by Kurram businessmen both locally and throughout the province.

Humanitarian Situation Worst for Minority Pockets

17. (C) The humanitarian situation throughout the agency is poor due to the road blockages. The real humanitarian crisis is for the pockets of Shi'a in lower Kurram and of Sunni in upper Kurram. Qadir reported that the FATA Secretariat approached the army to do helicopter resupply of these minority pockets but was turned down because of the prospect of anti-aircraft fire. Although militants on both sides are modifying ground machine

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guns and rockets to fire on planes, Qadir is skeptical of the effectiveness of such anti-aircraft fire. Prices of basic staples have skyrocketed throughout the agency. In Lower and Central Kurram, schools and banks have been closed, and electricity has been shut down for more than a month, which has led to a shortage of drinking water. Post contacts estimate that 100,000 of the half million inhabitants have left the agency since late 2007. Army helicopters regularly transport medicine, the critically wounded and some civilians between Parachinar and Peshawar. But normal supplies must get into the agency by paying off militants at checkpoints or transiting via smuggling routes. Kurram is one of the most fertile areas in FATA, which has helped to supply the agency with some of its food needs. USAID/OTI has been able to undertake limited operations with the Shi'a in Upper Kurram for three months but has not been able to undertake sustained programs in Lower Kurram.

Post Contacts

¶18. (C) Post contacts mentioned above include NWFP Governor Owais Ghani, Ghulam Qadir (Secretary for Law and Order at the FATA Secretariat), a former Additional Chief Secretary of the FATA Secretariat (a retired military brigadier general who has held senior civilian positions in NWFP and who advises top political and military leaders on FATA), the Khyber Political Agent and former Kurram PA, the head of the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) USAID/OTI sponsored program in Kurram, the Peshawar Bureau Chief of Dawn News, a local journalist based in Sunni-controlled Sadda, and Peshawar Liaison Officer from Combined Joint Taskforce 101.

Comment

¶19. (C) The Shi'a may be emboldened but the people of the agency are perplexed by what they view as a lack of political will to stop the bloodshed. More people have been killed in the past six weeks than were killed in all of 2007. Even though a military operation may occur eventually, the Pakistan security forces are unlikely to deploy in the near term given ongoing operations in Swat and Bajaur.

¶20. (C) The challenge now will be to prevent the spread of unrest beyond Kurram given the significant Shi'a populations in Orakzai, Hangu, Dera Ismail Khan and Bhakkal.
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